

Everything's OK

by Katherine Grosso

Lily took a deep breath and dragged her palms down her damp cheeks as if her face were clay. Then, she began to count: 1. *Gun in the shoebox*. 2. *Razor blade in the toolbox*. She couldn't even remember why or when she'd started it, only that it always calmed her down when she was like this. 3. *Rat poison in coffee*. The only sleep that found Lily these days was troubled, and opening her eyes did little to alleviate the dark feelings that followed. Sometimes it took her all the way to ten before she really calmed down. She had to stop at ten anyway—by that time, she usually couldn't think of any more creative ways to kill her husband.

She heard the shower water running and sighed deeply. Three was pretty good. Yesterday it was seven. She slid her feet into her slippers and the foot imprint that years of wear had made, pulled a robe off its hook, and headed down the hall.

"Brian," she said. She knocked on each door in the hallway as she went. "Billy, Jean, John," she called. "Time to get up."

Lily hung a left into the last room in the hallway and plucked the last of her five children—her five boys—from his crib and onto the changing table. The baby cooed and reached two hands out for her as she methodically swapped the soiled diaper for a clean one printed with shapes and Sesame Street characters.

"I see ten toes, a nose and two little ears," she said, applying baby powder to his bottom. Five kids and she was almost all out of baby-voice. "So big and so strong, I'm glad you came along."

Her mother used to say that to Lily whenever she had a sour face. She'd tap her nose and put her thin fingers in Lily's dimples until she giggled. Saying it to the—hopefully—last of her boys now was nothing short of muscle memory. Lily put one arm in the clean onesie, and as she watched him smile, she felt herself frown. He looked like Garrett—even this little she could tell. Same eyes, dark and beady, like a hamster's, always examining her. She picked him

up and put him to her shoulder so she didn't have to think about it anymore.

In the kitchen, Brian was lacing up Billy's shoes while the twins fought over who would get their father's coffee ready. 4. *Car crash*, she thought, as she put the baby in the high-chair.

"Dad said *I* could do it," Jean yelled as he shoved his brother. Usually it was the other way around.

"But he thought he was talking to *me*," John argued, shoving him back.

Lily had never wanted kids. She had a father growing up and knew enough about boys to know she never wanted any. But somehow, somewhere down the line she'd allowed herself to be wooed. Maybe it had been his big arms and how tightly he used to hold her, how secure she'd once felt. Secure enough, she supposed, that she'd accepted a place in Garrett's view of the world. She'd ignored his tendency for cruelty when he was drunk. She'd ignored his slightly misogynistic outlook. She'd ignored how unsettling it was to look in those eyes and have those eyes look back at her. A part of Lily she didn't like very much loved him.

"Boys," Lily interrupted—tried to interrupt. As always, they didn't stop for a second to acknowledge her. "Knock it off before—"

"Watch it!"

"*You* watch it!"

"Boys," she tried. "Boys—"

She thanked every god and deity she could think of that at least Brian was getting the coffee ready as she wrestled one twin off the other. The difference between Brian and the others was in his eyes: bright and blue. She knew it wasn't right to play favorites with your kids, but if she had to pick just one—at least he seemed to love her.

"Boys," Garrett said, descending the stairs. "What'd I say about fighting, huh?"

The boys jumped apart and stood at attention like identical toy soldiers, the way they always did when their father walked into the kitchen.

"That it's too early and it gets us nowhere," they recited.

Lily turned her back to the stove. She didn't need to look to know what happened next: Garrett would nod and hold out a hand. Brian would hand him his coffee in the #1 Dad ceramic mug he'd been given for Father's Day. He'd take a seat, snap his fingers for the paper, and Jean would jump to get it. Before he was finished, John would take his seat and Brian would help Billy into his.

Her own father used to descend the stairs every morning in the same way. Her mother would bring him his coffee and the paper while Lily waited patiently for her cereal. Her mother would smile sweetly to her and hum to the tune of "This Little Light of Mine" while she poured some milk in her father's coffee and then Lily's cereal. Eventually, her father would lift his dark eyes from the paper—

Lily shuddered as she felt Garrett's eyes on her, sizing her up the way they often did. They started at her feet, dragged themselves upward where they lingered for a bit on her behind before they stuck themselves somewhere at the back of her head. Her hands shook a little as she gripped the wooden spoon and felt his eyes finish running their course.

1. *Gun in the shoebox.*

There was the usual chatter coming from the table. The twins were talking, asking Garrett questions about his work. Jean loved construction, and the thought of his father operating a bulldozer always started a conversation. Billy chimed in, and it seemed even Nathan from his high-chair wanted a part of the discussion.

"I'm going to be like you when I grow up," John said.

"That's what *I* was going to say!" Jean hollered.

"Yeah!"

"Da!"

2. *Razor Blade in the toolbox.*

Lily knew her father would've scoffed at her inner monologue. He'd tell her she was too small, too mousy, too fragile. She thought of his drunk singing, *Little Lil, always chill*, and her mother's quiet laughter. She'd put a hand on Lily's shoulder, telling her it was OK and that she could be just as big and strong as she wanted. Her mother's voice was steady, regardless of whether he'd slapped her, and even after he'd shattered a glass by throwing it at the wall. On

any given day, Lily could see her mother's lips pursed in a half-smile.

"I think Mommy's still sleeping," Garrett said. She heard a chorus of laughter and then more coarsely he added, "Lil, are you with us?"

Lily ran her fingers through her hair, and when she turned back to the group, she showed a smile and all her teeth. Then, she started pouring the lumpy mixture into bowls, Garrett first, then Brian, Jean, John, Billy, and herself. She poured out some Cheerios for Nathan and sat. She listened as the boys talked and spooned mounds of the slop into their mouths or their shirts, but ate very little. She wondered if they'd noticed how much weight she'd lost, how frail she'd become. 3. *Rat poison in his coffee.*

Garrett's mug crashed to the floor and shattered into pieces. Lily's head snapped up from her breakfast to find Jean stunned.

Then he erupted. "Hey, Stupid!" He shoved his brother. "Look what you made me do."

"I didn't *make* you do anything!" the other said, swatting back at him. "I'm not stupid, you are, *Big Ears!*"

"We have the same ears, *Stupid.*"

"I said, don't call me stupid—"

"Enough." Garrett slammed an open palm on the table.

4. *Car crash.*

"But he dropped the—"

His open palm landed on John's cheek.

"What did I just say?" Garrett continued.

A full hand print grew on the side of her seven-year-old's face, and she watched him slide his bowl toward his brother, sinking his head into his hands to hide. Then she got up slowly, numbly, and grabbed the dishtowel from the stove rack and began to pick up shards and scrub the floor. 5. *Construction 'accident'.* 6. *Knife in the drawer.* 7. *Peanuts.* 8. *House fire.*

"Head up," Garrett said. She heard him snap his fingers and winced. "Big boys don't cry."

Lily got up from her knees slowly, carefully. She put a hand on her son's back and guided his head up with two gentle fingers at his chin. "You're alright. Right, Johnny?"

Lily hated how small her voice sounded. She was eight when she'd spilled her own father's coffee on the floor and shattered the mug. He'd told her

that there was nothing going on in her “pretty, little head” of hers. She could see her mother on her knees scrubbing the floor, getting up slowly to tell her it was alright and all clean.

How silly Lil Lily, her father's voice taunted.

Relax, sweetheart, her mother's voice.

9. *Hitman.*

She tried to meet Garrett's eyes, but she couldn't bring herself the whole way there. She could feel him looking her up and down until they rested on her face. Lily wondered if her mother ever counted.

Garrett tossed his head and rolled his eyes. “If you keep babying them, that's all they'll be,” he said. He pushed his chair out from the table and adjusted his pants as he got up.

1. *Gun in the shoebox.*

“He's only seven,” she muttered. “It's just a mug.”

Her breathing became shallow and the hand that gripped her vocal cords tightened as he stood over her, deliberately, the way he did when he wanted her to know just how little ‘Lil’ really was. She didn't move.

“Of course,” he said, pecking her cheek and walking past her. He pinched her backside on his way to the sink. 2. *Razor blade in the toolbox.*

“Jean knows I love him,” he finished.

“John,” she muttered. It was a slight mental hiccup—a reflex she thought all mothers of twins must have. She wrung her hands together as his eyes narrowed on her face, and he started to strut back toward her.

“What?” he laughed.

“That's John,” she said again. “Only you...said Jean.”

“I said, John,” he chuckled, gesturing to the child as if to say, “who the hell else.” He shook his head. “But sure, Lil,” he sighed, giving her another peck. “If that makes you happy.”

Lil? Lil always chill.

“Is something wrong?” Garrett asked her from the table.

“No, hun,” she said, re-washing an already clean dish in the sink. *Everything's OK.*

Lily was nineteen and pregnant with Brian when she got the news, only just out of the house. The funeral she could hardly remember but she could call upon the wake any minute of that day in vivid detail. She saw her mother, pale and waxy in her casket,

often in her dreams but sometimes as a shadow in her own reflection. They said she killed herself, but lying there among the velvet innards of her casket, she was smiling.

Billy was laughing in his high chair and the twins would soon follow as if nothing had happened, as if it all went away when she cleaned the floor. Garrett would soon belittle her by feigning compassion and hugging her shoulders.

“What about you, Bri?” Garrett asked their ten-year-old. “What's the matter?”

He was massaging the boy's shoulders with his large, calloused hands, and Brian's nose and eyes scrunched together. Brian frowned and remained quiet.

“I know,” Garrett taunted. “You want to be like Mommy when you grow up and not me?”

The ten-year-old shrugged.

“Mommy doesn't even want to be Mommy, Bri,” he said with a laugh, giving one of Brian's cheeks a hard pinch. “You'd be better off being a damn crossing guard.”

Garrett turned away from him, and Lily felt her muscles relax and a small sigh escape her lips. She hadn't realized both her hands were linked together at her chest, her knuckles white.

“Fine,” she heard Brian mumble.

“Oh yeah?” he continued with a breath of a laugh. “You'd like that, Bri?”

Brian looked up, his bright blue eyes—his different eyes—in line with his fathers'.

“As long as I don't have to live with you when I grow up,” he said bitterly.

Lily watched Garrett's face contort and redden, as he took two steps forward. Lily watched in horror as Brian was pulled up and out of his chair by the collar, the boy's eyes now panicked. His arms shot up to try to break his father's grip. Only the baby moved in his high-chair.

Brian was kind, Brian was little, and his hands were outstretched, reaching for her.

“Mom,” he called.

Garrett tightened his grip on the boy's shirt as he near dragged Brian upstairs.

Lil? Lil stays nice and still.

She watched him take her oldest boy upstairs. She heard some wailing, she heard thuds and she went back to counting.

Now, she was sure her mother counted.

She felt a peace wash over her as she dried the boy's dishes and restacked them in shelves. She told them not to worry. She cleaned up the baby's mess and re-tied Billy's shoes. More thuds, more crying, more counting. Lily caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror by the doorway to the kitchen. She saw pale lips and teeth, dull blue eyes, and a crooked nose. A calm smile painted on her face.

"Mom?" Jean asked, peaking his head up from the sight of his hands for the first time.

1. Overdose, she thought.

"Everything's OK," she said.